

Farewell to the Famous New York Paramount

by Ray Brubacher

Pictures by
Elbert Marlowe and Frank Myers

TIME: 12 noon to 6 p.m., DATE: 27 September 1964, PLACE: N.Y. PARAMOUNT, Broadway & Times Square, so read the official notice of the Delaware Valley Chapter. This was it, the moment we had all been dreading, but now knew was coming to pass, this was to be the farewell to the undisputed star showplace of the nation, and its emperor of organs, the 4 manual 36 rank Wurlitzer regarded as the finest theatre pipe organ ever built. The Delaware Valley and New York Chapters of ATOE had been granted special permission to hold a farewell meeting at the theatre, which had formally closed a few weeks prior to the 27th. By noon Sunday, when the side entrance doors of the theatre were opened, a line of fans and enthusiasts more than a block in length, had gathered. Many fans were already inside setting up tape recorders to preserve the coming events of the afternoon. There must have been at least twenty-five thousand dollars worth of equipment set up in the balcony, by the time the program started. Master of ceremonies for the afternoon was Bill Crawford, Delaware Valley member, who introduced various members of the crew who had put in many long hours of work, to restore the famed instrument to top shape.

Since the featured guest of the afternoon, Don Baker, would not play until 4 p.m., the organ was made available to members, each being limited to five minutes console time, due to the great number wishing to try their hand at piloting the gigantic console. Others were content just to touch and pat, to admire and say that they had seen the top star. At 2:30, the organ was given a brief rest. During the break, Delaware Valley Chairman John Armstrong announced the availability of a fully illustrated souvenir program, donations for which would go to pay the expenses incurred for the theatre. At 3 p.m., the program again got under way, and by this time everyone knew that Ashley Miller, Ray Bohr, and Jack Ward, of the Radio City Music Hall, Dr. C.A.J. Parmentier, former organist at the Roxy Theatre, Leroy Lewis, and other organ notables were in the audience, and for the next hour, the entire theatre was emblazoned in glory with the superb talent of these stars in the theatre organ world. At 4 p.m., the organ was again allowed a brief rest while Ben Hall spoke briefly on the history of the theatre, and



introduced Dan Papp, the man who was the keeper of the Paramount organ for thirty-five years of its thirty-eight year history. After a few more brief announcements, the moment all of the eight hundred plus in attendance had been eagerly awaiting, arrived. Don Baker, presented through the courtesy of the Conn Organ Company, took his place at the console. Don has the distinction of having the longest tenure at the Paramount — thirteen years, and after a brief pause while he located and re-familiarized himself with everything, he launched into what was to become a breathtaking recital in every respect. Everyone knew that Don was playing as never before, that his entire heart and soul were flowing out through his fingers, that he would be the very last ever to play this Wurlitzer in its original setting.

There were several times when the concert was interrupted by spontaneous outbursts of cheers and applause as Don went through numbers he made famous at the Paramount organ, such as "Tea for Two," and "When Yuba Plays the Tuba." His rendition of an already overplayed "Exodus" was absolutely the most thrilling, hair raising, spine chilling playing that this writer has ever heard, and by the time it was over, the general feeling was that of double goosepimples. Don then took us on a musical tour through the organ, in which everything, including the rarely heard tuned tympani, as well as the 32 foot Diaphone was played. This is one theatre that was strong enough to withstand the 32 foot stop, and it is wonderful to note that its rumblings were heard throughout the afternoon. Another addition had been the replacement of one of the vox humana ranks, (there are four) with another Posthorn on the left side. When the two were used off tremulant, the effect was electric.

After playing a few request numbers, Don concluded the program with numbers of his own choosing, and when the familiar "Auld Lang Syne" was touchingly rendered, there immediately became noticeable flutters of white throughout the theatre. The applause was not disorderly, there were little or no shouts for encores or whistling, for everyone knew now that the end had



Don Baker talks about "The Good Old Days" at the Paramount.
Chicago in '65 theatre organ

arrived. Don pressed the down button, and started his descent, but through some forethought, halted its descent, possibly to allow everyone one last look at what is soon to become just a memory for all who were there.

In conclusion, I would like to quote Ben Hall in his last paragraph of the souvenir program for the afternoon. It reads . . . "So listen well this afternoon. The organ has been assured a fine new home in another part of the country, but the special magic of the Paramount sound will never be heard again, except in our memories. The song is over, but the melody lingers on. . ."

The following article about Don Baker and the story The Paramount Theatre (page 6) were written by Ben Hall and formed part of the printed souvenir program printed for the final Paramount Concert. We thought that our readers that were unable to attend would enjoy this bit of theatre organ history.



Jeff Barker tries his hand at the famed Paramount Wurlitzer during the farewell program.

ABOUT DON BAKER

The artist who appears today through the courtesy of the Conn Organ Corporation has had three careers, all of them brilliant enough to assure his place in the theatre organ hall of fame. His was the last of the great names to rise to prominence during the theatre organ's golden age; with 15 LP albums and more than 50 78-rpm discs to his credit, and is a recording star of the first magnitude.


Born in St. Thomas, Ontario, in 1903, Don came to New York in 1923 to play as pit pianist in the Flushing Theatre on Long Island, along with the six-piece "Flushing Symphony." Following the classic pattern, he got his chance at the organ one night when the supper-hour relief organist didn't show up; Baker sat at the console and played chords for two hours, but that was enough to hook him on the theatre organ for good. His next jobs were in the old Rialto and the Rivoli theatres in New York, playing silent pictures. When the Brooklyn Paramount opened in 1928, Baker was on hand to play half-hour concerts mornings and supper hour; he recalls that when talkies first came in, he and Henry Murtagh used to play incidental music to sould films on the Wurlitzer very softly, to cover up the surface noise of the old Vitaphone discs. When Murtagh left, Baker worked with Stuart Barrie, and today there still remains an inscription on the little door to the organ lift in the (now) Long Island University gym that reads "Baker and Barrie - their door - keep out - 'nuff said."



In 1931 Baker was organist at the Staten Island Paramount until going to England to broadcast over the BBC and to record his memorable "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf" at the Wurlitzer in the Granada Theatre, Tooting. Returning from England a year later he became staff organist for Station WOR on the Wurlitzer (Style E). Then, in 1935, he took charge at the Paramount and immediately became Ned York's favorite organist, a spot he held until 1948. While at the Paramount he made his unforgettable albums of 78's for Columbia, records which have since become classics and which bridged the gap between the 78-rpm era and the age of the LP. These recordings, and a host of singles for general background music, were all made on the 21-rank studio Wurlitzer. He also made many Community Sing shorts for Columbia Pictures on the same organ. In 1948, Baker and his wife pulled up their New York roots and headed West; bought a home and settled down in Las Vegas. He played a 7-year engagement at the Last and New Frontier Hotels, followed by 3 years at Harrah's Club at Lake Tahoe.

Don now spends 3 weeks out of every month demonstrating the new Conn 641 Theatre Organ all over the country. After making 10 albums for Capitol Records (his most recent, *Sound Showcase*, is virtually a trip through the Lorin Whitney Robert Morton pipe organ, delightfully demonstrating every rank), Don has just signed with Kapp. His first recording on that label, made on the Conn 641, will be released in a few weeks.

The members of ATOE are extremely grateful to the Conn Organ Corporation for giving us this unparalleled opportunity to say farewell to "the Mother Wurlitzer" with Don Baker - the man who knows the Paramount organ better than anyone else alive - on hand to give it the send-off it deserves.



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Reprinted from an article appearing in the New York Times, September 28, 1964.

By A. H. WEILER

The Paramount Theater, destined for new ownership and, perhaps, oblivion, yesterday housed one of the most appreciative audiences in the 38-year history of the one time symbol of cinema opulence.

For about six hours, starting at noon, it was farewell and hail to the theater's "Mighty Wurlitzer" organ at a salute given in obvious respect by 300 members of the American Association of Theater Organ Enthusiasts. Technically, it was the Delaware Valley and New York Chapters of the A.A.T.O.E. who were gathered but, according to Richard C. Simonton, founder of the organization, the organ buffs represented, as he did, such distant areas as Los Angeles and Atlanta.

Many like Don Robinson, who arrived from Utica, N.Y., accompanied by his young son, Stephen, went to the console to play with the rapt devotion of a professional of the picture palaces of the 1920's and 1930's.

"Of course, it's a hobby," said Mr. Robinson, who conducts "The Organ Loft," a radio program devoted to classical and theater organ music on station WUFM in Utica. "But it is more than that. It is a love for a living instrument as well as something that symbolizes an important part of our past."

Post to Be Preserved

The past, in this case, will be preserved, according to Mr. Simonton. He and Ben Hall, theater historian and author of "The Best Available Seats," explained that the Paramount's organ was built at a cost of \$75,000 by the Wurlitzer company in 1926 to the specifications of the late Jesse Crawford, who, as the "Poet of the Organ," opened the theater accompanied by his wife, Helen.

It's not the largest theatre organ in the world - it has 36 ranks of pipes as compared with the Radio City Music Hall's 58 - but it is considered the finest Wurlitzer of them all, the Mother Wurlitzer," Mr. Hall pointed out. "There were others built - for the Fox houses in Brooklyn, Detroit and St. Louis. Only the latter is still in use."

Mr. Simonton, who founded the organization in 1955, a group that now numbers more than 2,500 members, said that the A.A.T.O.E. was in the process of acquiring the Belmont Theater in Los Angeles and that the Paramount organ was about to be purchased from the theater owners by Fanny Wurlitzer, 80-year-old chairman of the Wurlitzer company.

"I think," Mr. Simonton said, "the price is \$15,000 but it is worth it we feel, to be able to save it from destruction - this happened to the organ at the Roxy Theater, you know - and place it in its proper surroundings, the 1,500-seat Belmont Theater, which was built for an organ like this one. We plan to give concerts for our members as well as use it to accompany silent feature films."

THE PARAMOUNT THEATRE - November 19, 1926 - September 27, 1964

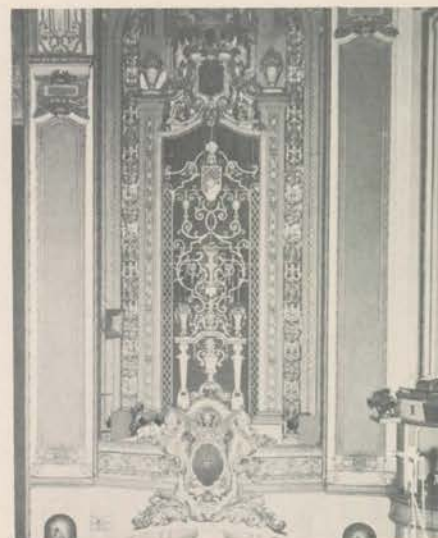
The closing of the New York Paramount is not just the shuttering of another outmoded movie palace. Like the Roxy and the San Francisco Fox, the Paramount had a special personality that set it apart from the rest. Though small in comparison with some of the later five and six thousand-seat cinema temples (3,664 seats), it had an elegance and refinement that none of the others could match. Designed by the noted architects George and C. W. Rapp, who also designed the late Brooklyn Paramount, the Chicago Theatre, Loew's Kings in Brooklyn, Loew's Jersey in Jersey City, it cost (together with the Paramount Building) \$17,000,000. As flagship of the vast Paramount-Public chain of theatres, it was the showcase of Paramount pictures and the originating point of the lavish Publix stage presentations which toured the Paramounts of the nation. Now that it is closed, it might truly be said that the "golden age of the movie palace" in America is at an end.

Of all the wonders of the Paramount (the elevator orchestra pit, the vast dome from which visitors could observe the spectacle of audience and show from above, the Hall of Nations with stones from all over the world, the eight floors of dressing rooms and rehearsal halls, the corps of courtly uniformed ushers), foremost of the wonders was the 36-rank Wurlitzer organ, designed to the exacting specification of the Poet of the Organ, Jesse Crawford himself. Brought East from the Chicago Theatre where he and his wife, Helen Anderson Crawford, had been enchanting Chicagoans with their twin console concerts, Crawford opened the Paramount organ with an offering called "Organs I Have Played." At first there was no second console, and when the Crawfords played their duets, Jesse played obligatto on a little manual mounted on the left cheek of the main console as Helen performed her daring jazz arrangements. Later, according to Dan Papp who voiced the instrument to Crawford's wishes and who maintained the organ for 35 of its 38 years, a 4-manual slave console was installed in the right side of the pit and two moveable consoles were put on stage.

The Crawfords got star billing on the



6 Entrance doors - Paramount Theatre.



Right organ chambers - Percussion at very top.

Paramount's beautifully curved marquee, but a third organist played there while they did: Sigmund Krungold opened the house daily with a 20-minute recital at 11:00, and also played for the silent picture for one show a day before the Paramount orchestra started playing at 1:00. When the Crawfords left the Paramount in 1932, England's Reginald Foort assumed the star spot for a time. For the next three years the Paramount Wurlitzer was silent. Then, in 1935 Don Baker took over for the longest engagement of any organist at the Times Square house: 13 years. During this time Baker built up a tremendous following with his brilliant showpieces and sing-alongs. When he left in 1948, a young California organist named George Wright came to play for three years. After George left in 1951, the organ was used only intermittently; usually Bill Floyd was the organist. Following Bill Floyd, ABC-Paramount Organist Bob Mack too on the duties of playing at premieres and special events. For the last six years Bob has been house organist at the theatre and also devoted a great deal of his time to keeping up the instrument after Dan Papp's retirement four years ago.

The Paramount Wurlitzer, though not the largest Wurlitzer ever built, has nevertheless been the organ by which all other Wurlitzers were judged. A happy combination of acoustics, shallow-chamber installation, and loving care gave it the most thrilling sound of any theatre organ in the world.

Chicago in '65

theatre organ